

## WOMAN AND THE CHURCH

IN the world of to-day, and especially in a world at war, the Church stands apart. It has standards that do not change with circumstances, though their application may. And it has never thought that man is capable of standing alone, or expected him to provide perfection in this life, knowing quite well that however much you may alter the world, human nature will be much the same. So to-day it would seem that the Church may have, already has, a great opportunity and a great work to do. And one, moreover, that her officials, the priests and Bishops, cannot do alone. Pope Pius saw this when he developed Catholic Action, that emphasis on the part the laity can and must play in the mission of the Church to the world. It is clear from many passages in different Encyclicals that men and women have each their part in this mission, as it also is abundantly clear from a consideration of fact. What is the part of women? Our experience of war and its after-effects in our own life-time bids us see even now another new world in the making. The apostolate of the laity will be of more urgency than before. Here we are concerned with certain fundamentals of that apostolate, and in particular with the rôle of the Catholic woman.

All through the history of the Church women have played a great part. Our Lady in the beginning had, and still holds, a most exalted position; among the innumerable women saints there have been very public and active ones like St. Catherine of Sienna, a dyer's daughter who actively influenced Popes and Kings, and others whom the world has hardly heard of till their death, like St. Teresa of Lisieux: women who have worked at home and pioneers who have gone all over the world. Generally they were religious or were married. But to-day, with the great changes in ways of living has come a great difference in the

circumstances of women's lives. So that in England and America feminists claim complete equality with men in all spheres, in Russia legislation and practice aim at making women equally with men, identical units in the state, in the East, in Turkey and Persia, women must go unveiled by law, in complete contradiction with established custom. So for Catholic women everywhere, various problems have arisen because of these changes and they are frequently problems that cannot be ignored by the individual and that have direct bearing on her relation with the Church.

Before we can fruitfully discuss these questions it is necessary to find out what the real position of woman is and what her rights and duties are. Holding as we do that there are absolute standards by which things can be measured, and realising that these absolute standards, together with corresponding absolute values, are to be found essentially in the Church, and that they are essentially connected with the human race, it becomes a matter of sifting the absolute, and so permanent, in the question of women, from the temporary and changing, in order that the former may be applied to things as they are to-day.

In the first account of creation in the book of Genesis it says: 'And God created man in his own image; to the image of God He created him. Male and female He created them' (Gen. i, 27). And when the Pharisees were questioning our Lord as to when it was lawful for a man to put away his wife, He began His answer by saying: 'Have ye not read that He Who from the beginning made man, made them male and female?' (Matt. xix, 4). It is to be noticed that God created man in His own image and that He created them male and female. The latter point is never questioned; the former has been held to mean that only man was created in the image of God, but as St. Thomas explains, this image of God is chiefly in the mind, and so is true equally of man and woman. Or as

the Catechism has it, this likeness to God is chiefly in the soul, and the remark is made without distinction between man and woman.

But when we consider the position of woman in the world before the coming of our Lord, we do not find this opinion of St. Thomas and the Catechism generally held. On the contrary, almost without exception, woman was regarded as inferior to man, as not fully human. In the East, in Greece, in Rome she was first and foremost the female, valued as being able to bear children but not as a human person equally with man. Not that they did not respect her, but rather as a chattel of importance. And it was so with the Jews too. This is reflected in the parable where the unjust steward is told to go and sell his wife and children and all that he has. And in a prayer recommended for daily repetition to Jews of about the time of our Lord was the phrase: 'Praised be God that He has not created me a woman.'

How this state of affairs came about is fairly clear. Women in the ordinary sense of the term are weaker than men, and the kind of work that fell to their lot in the relatively simpler societies of those days made it almost impossible to establish, put into practice and maintain, their equality as a person with man. The dice was heavily loaded against them in any such effort and the exceptions only make the general practice clearer. When, after the sin of Adam and Eve, God spoke to them, He told Adam that he would labour and toil and eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, while to Eve He said that she should bring forth her children in sorrow and be under the dominion of her husband. Unhappy as all this was in itself, the fallen state of man made it still worse, and made such truths as the equality of man and woman as persons obscure in theory and neglected in practice. So that we find a gradual narrowing in even the Jewish conception of the nature and place of woman as time went on.

With the coming of our Lord all things were changed. Just as He removed the bar that original sin had raised between man and God, so He reasserted the equal rights of man and woman before God as persons. Both as human beings, created, and now redeemed, stood in the same relation to God. And this in violent contradiction to all current ideas and practice. It is made clear all through the gospels, in our Lord's preaching and practice, in spite of the fact that nowhere is it the subject of a specific pronouncement. He talked to the woman at the well who had had so many husbands. Indeed, it was to her He first declared His mission, and astonished the disciples by what He did. He healed Simon's wife's mother, He counted Martha and Mary among the friends He cared to visit, He helped the Syro-Phoenician woman for her faith and ready wit, and to the woman taken in adultery His comment was: 'Go and sin no more.' Women were with Him when He died, and it was to Mary Magdalen that He first appeared after His resurrection.

This equality of men and women before God as responsible persons is the first point on which the position of women turns, and it was in the teaching and practice of our Lord that it was first made clear, explicit and binding. How clear and explicit and binding is shown by the way in which it was recognised by the early Church, working in the midst of a world to which such ideas must have seemed most revolutionary, and subversive of the common good. But there is never any suggestion that women should be barred from public worship or from a knowledge of the Christian mysteries. Between the Ascension and Pentecost, waiting with the disciples, were the women and Mary. In the Acts, a great number of the friends and helpers of St. Paul were women, some of whom had, moreover, an official standing in the organisation of the Church, in complete opposition to the current Jewish practice, which refused the teaching of the law to women and then de-

barred them, as too ignorant, from any share in public worship. Again the fact that it was never, as far as we know, a subject for discussion shows how fundamental it must have been to our Lord's teaching. The far less important question of things unclean, on the other hand, although it had been discussed by our Lord in His lifetime, caused a great stir, and was finally settled only by a direct vision to Peter.

In Christianity alone is this valuation of man and woman as equal in human personality made fundamental to the scheme of things. But to imagine that a complete equality or identity between them were implied would be grossly to misread the scriptures and willfully to disregard the facts. Having declared that God made man in His own image, a declaration that Christ made clear was true both of man and woman, the account in Genesis, quoted by our Lord, goes on to say that 'male and female He created them.' And nowhere in the gospels is there any attempt to identify the sphere of man with that of woman. Rather, the contrary is shown in the singling out of men as apostles. Our Lord showed such complete disregard for the normal status of women then in force that it would seem certain that, had He wished women to have a place in the official priesthood, He would not have refrained because it outraged existing convention. He talked first to a woman about His mission, but He made men His priests. This need imply, to an open mind, no invidious comparison, but rather an acceptance of something rooted in the natural order.

'Male and female He created them.' So that side by side with the equality of men and women as human persons goes a fundamental difference of function. A difference that does not completely divide, since both are reasonable human beings, but one that is most clearly marked, first in their bodies and then, since body and soul make one thing, on every other plane. So that it is bound to go

deep, as is generally recognised in language and custom and tradition. It is necessary to examine this difference and see in what it lies and what are its consequences.

It is fundamentally, of course, a difference of function in the creation of new life, in the one act that brings men nearest to the creative activity of God, in an act that societies have always regarded as most important, however they have legislated for it. The specific function of the woman is motherhood; of the man, fatherhood. The consequent difference between the sexes is the first important fact in society, as their union in marriage provides the first unit in society—a unit, as the Popes never tire of stressing, sanctioned by God, raised to the dignity of a sacrament, fundamental for the health of any larger social group.

Motherhood and fatherhood are two very different activities that extend in their consequences over the widest possible field. A great deal of nonsense is talked and a great many assumptions are made, by the women as well as the men, in discussions of the differences between men and women. But it is clear that, in the family as normally constituted, the woman is more directly connected with the growth and the development of the child and the father less directly. This derives from the nature of things, and that is the point to be emphasised. So that, as a result, the woman is tied to the more human elements; she has to deal with persons where the man has rather to deal with things. The same tendency appears in her thinking. She is often reproached with being less reasonable, less analytical than man. It is not that he is rational and she is not, but that because of her specific function she needs and has a different sort of approach. So that a man needs to exert his reason rather than his affections in many things, a woman her affections rather than her reason—which is far from saying that a man need not be, or is not, capable of affection or a woman of reasoning. It is a matter, rather, of emphasis, and Pope Pius XI, in writing

of marriage, summed it up in his phrase: 'if the man is the head, the woman is the heart.' Every woman is potentially a mother, whether she ever is so in fact or not, so that this bias is to some extent in every woman by virtue of her womanhood.

If this difference of function, with the extent of its influence, is recognised, it follows that any practical attempt to make men and women identical is not only destined to fail, as any wilful disobedience to fact is bound to fail, but also involves the neglect of a fundamental principle, namely that the only possible way in which any being can hope to reach full happiness and completion is through the best and most complete use of its *own* nature. A woman can reach her happiness and completion only *as a woman*, not by trying to get rid of her womanhood; and so too for a man.

These fundamental considerations answer our question as to the position of women: they are human persons and as such equal with men; but by virtue of their function they are distinguished from men, and that distinction goes far beyond the merely physical plane. And only through their womanhood can they hope to reach full happiness and completion.

The consequent question of rights and duties is so wide that it is easier to consider it under two heads; women inside marriage and women outside marriage. In both of them, traditional attitudes are now questioned; but in both, women must live as members of the Church.

Apart from considerations of the permanence of marriage and its inherent morality, which are both, as such, outside the scope of this essay, there is the primary question of the position of the woman in the family. St. Paul has said: 'Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church' (Eph. v, 22-3). Pope Pius XI, quoting this in *Casti Connubii*, went on to say: 'This sub-

jection, however, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman both in view of her dignity as a human person, and in view of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion; nor does it bid her obey her husband's every request if not in harmony with right reason or with the dignity due to a wife . . . but it forbids that exaggerated liberty which cares not for the good of the family . . . For as the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.' The fittingness of there being one head, in whom authority shall be vested, in the small society of the family is clear from an examination of the need of any society. In the family that authority, coming from God, is vested in the person of the father, who has to administer laws which he, with his wife, is equally bound to obey. He has no right to make other laws, and no right over the personal life of his wife other than that she has over his through the mutual self-giving of marriage. And if the man fail, as the Pope explains, the woman must take his place.

In the Holy Family, although Our Lady held, in one way, a more exalted position than St. Joseph, it was to the latter that all the directions that concerned the conduct of the family as such were given. In this particular family there could clearly be no question of the inferiority of the woman, yet she was content to accept the part normally assigned to the woman in marriage. So in any Christian marriage the 'subjection' of the wife in no way implies inferiority. The man and the woman perfect each other, sanctify each other through the sacrament, through being most fully themselves and through filling to the best of their capacity the role proper to each. They have equal rights over each other in marriage, but there is a difference of function, and it is a difference that is in the nature of

things and does not depend on any convention made by man.

Such is the Catholic view of marriage, a view based on the principles already touched on, one that (again in the words of the Pope) gives the wife 'a truly regal throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospels.' If she descends from this throne, 'she will soon be reduced to the old slavery, if not in appearance, certainly in reality, and become as among the pagans the mere instrument of man.' This is being borne out in Russia and in Germany to-day. In Russia all the emphasis is on the equality of man and woman; and with the attempt to put this into practice in every sphere, marriage has lost its meaning, the family has gone, the home as we know it has gone, and such things as birth control, divorce and abortion have logically followed. In Germany, on the other hand, all the emphasis is on function, so that some of Hitler's pronouncements sound almost as though they had come from one of our Bishops; but the end is the state and its material well-being, not the well-being of the person, so that while child-bearing is subsidised, moral considerations are lost.

If Christian marriage and the family are to be restored to their true position, it will be as much by example as by teaching; and primarily by the example of the mother, who has it in her power to make the home a true centre of activity, where love is the rule, as befits a Christian group, and where each member is respected as a person and learns so to respect others, where the practice of the faith can flourish fully and organically, and where the citizens of this world, as well as of the next, will receive their most valuable training. So in a full married life the Catholic woman can help the Church in two ways: by actually bringing up her children as members of the Church and helping her husband to sanctify himself in the state of life to which he is vowed, and also by presenting to the world

an example of true womanhood fully used, and through it of some of the deepest principles of the faith that the world stands in such need of to-day. One of the sayings of Our Lord that the world has rightly taken to heart is: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'

There are many women at the present time who either do not wish to marry or are unable to marry, and they present a problem to which not enough attention has been paid. Undoubtedly the first duty of a society is to the family on whose health it depends; and to-day society as it is does not provide the possibility of family life for all who desire it. It is reasonable to think that, were it so, the question of single women and careers for women might be considerably altered; for marriage in such a society would not condemn women to the home as to a prison, or debar them from a use of the mind, as some people tend to think. In practice, many women must remain single and must work for their living. They are still women, and they will still reach their happiness and perfection most fully as women. Whatever kind of work they may have to do, they will bring to it a different point of view from that of men wherever it touches on life; and therefore they have their own specific contribution to bring to any work on which they are engaged, a contribution that will be the richer in so far as they realise that and are not misled into thinking that they will be of more use if they try to approach things from the man's point of view, and moreover they will be a living example of principles rooted in the Faith and helping the world in general towards a fuller appreciation of truth.

Many of them, too, will be freer to work actively for the Church and to work also for the righting of historical injustices in the relationship of the two sexes, without confusing their rightful equality with a false and impossible identification. By attempting to establish a rightful place for women in the public life which they have all, to some

extent, to share with men, they will in yet another way be showing the Church to the world, as well as making the world a place where women may more easily and more fully live their share in the life of that same Church.

Women have their specific and extremely important contribution to make to the religious and social life of a people and to the intellectual and artistic life wherever conditions are such as allow of it. In all these activities women can make the Christian scheme of things a living reality for themselves, for their families, for the people they work among, and by so doing they can help to create a living Christian society in which the Church can truly flourish. And more than that, they show the world, in one of the most convincing possible ways, by example, the existence and the value for mankind of some of the deepest and most fundamental truths which the Catholic Faith expounds and defends, truths which are to-day least understood and most needed.

This sounds an impossible programme, but like most things that matter in the world, it can be done only through individual effort, through this woman and that woman accepting her womanhood and using it to the full, instead of finding it a matter of imagined inferiority so that it must be minimised or clothed in a spurious manhood, and all that it involves discarded as far as possible. Living obedient to truth and to fact, whether she has time for active works of the apostolate or not, every woman will, nevertheless, have begun to 'go and teach all nations' at a time when there are signs that they will listen.

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